

Statement by Representative James A. Leach
Chairman, Subcommittee on Asia and the Pacific
Hearing on Recent Developments in Nepal and Sri Lanka
March 15, 2006

On behalf of the Subcommittee I would like to extend a warm welcome to our distinguished Administration witness. Don Camp is the Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for South Asia affairs in the newly expanded Bureau of South and Central Asian affairs. We welcome you back and we look forward to a productive relationship with the new Assistant Secretary for the Bureau, Richard Boucher, who many of us know and who is a well-respected career professional in the Department.

The Subcommittee meets today to review recent developments in two important countries in South Asia, both of whom have been struggling to overcome bitter legacies of domestic unrest that threaten internal stability and economic prosperity in both societies. Although the origins of the conflicts in Nepal and Sri Lanka are distinct, both present profound humanitarian and political challenges for the region, as well as for the United States and the broader international community.

Each year since the Maoist rebellion began in 1996 the Himalayan kingdom of Nepal has experienced ever increasing difficulty coping with the challenges posed by the rebels and in managing the overall political, economic and security situation. The assumption of direct rule by the King, with its associated restrictions on civil liberties, has not stabilized the situation; indeed, it appears to have only strengthened the Maoists as an alternative to the state and bolstered ties between them and the legitimate political parties. Meanwhile, already among the poorest and least developed countries in the world, Nepal's economy has continued to weaken. Compounding the ongoing tragedy for the people of Nepal has been a marked deterioration in human rights conditions, with the Department of State concluding in its country report for 2005 that the government's "poor record worsened" and that the Maoists also continue to perpetrate numerous abuses.

In Sri Lanka, despite relatively good economic fundamentals and a solid social welfare structure, the country has not taken off as another regional "tiger" principally because it remains mired in a multi-decade long civil war. Prospects for a permanent resolution of the conflict appear dim. Fortunately, 11th hour efforts by the Norwegian Government to broker a new round of negotiations in Geneva, Switzerland, late last month, helped save the badly battered four-year old ceasefire agreement from likely collapse.

From a Congressional perspective, one has the sense that the assassination of the Foreign Minister in the summer of 2005, coupled with other politically-motivated killings, dramatically eroded support for the current ceasefire agreement among many of the majority Sinhalese people in Sri Lanka. Likewise, one also has the impression that the failure of the government to reach an agreement with the Tamil separatists (LTTE) on a mechanism to provide post-Tsunami relief to areas in the north and east of the country, as well as ongoing paramilitary operations against the insurgents, may have convinced the LTTE leadership that Colombo was unlikely to commit to a just and permanent peace.

In this troubling context, in which we underscore our concern for the people of both countries, we have a number of questions about the situation in Nepal and Sri Lanka and the implications of such for United States policy. We look forward to your testimony and the exchange of views to follow.
